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FORUM

WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

ARCHIVES

Snake Handling and Plato:

Identifying Academic Folklore

By Kenneth Clarke

This is an account of a moment of revelation. It will, then, be devoid of footnotes and other paraphernalia of scholarship, for its authority is insight derived from a vivid personal experience. The experience is akin to those described in legends about men struck on the head by a falling apple or becoming buoyant in a bathtub.

In this instance I was struck by certain unmistakable similarities of action, expression, and intonation in two activities which I observed only hours apart. One of these was a videotape of the in-church services of a snake-handling religious cult in East Tennessee; the other was a meeting of the curriculum committee of the College of Arts and Humanities at Western Kentucky University. Like others who feel a flash of insight upon making a fortuitous observation while meditating on a problem, I had been concerned over the years about the plight of the humanities in higher education, and like most other folklorists, I am occasionally intrigued by the problem of defining folklore.

I am not sure that the state of the humanities curriculum in American higher education can be correctly described as a "plight." It seems clear, however, that many professors of history, literature, language, and philosophy share the feeling that their subject matter, standards, status, and even survival are threatened. It is not uncommon to encounter devil-hunting in which a writer identifies folklore, linguistics, and popular culture as the villains in academe. People who deal with these subjects are ordinarily keenly aware of an uneasy relationship with faculty members in more established disciplines. The relationship may range downward from amused indifference through grudging tolerance and all the way to open, no-quarters hostility.

I am not sure either that all folklorists are occasionally preoccupied with a definition of folklore. I should just say that all folklorists whom I happen to know sometimes display such a concern. The problem is that what we call folklore is expressed in so many ways by so many kinds of people in so many cultural contexts that it is difficult if not impossible to develop a concise, valid definition that will include enough and exclude enough without becoming self-defeating in vagueness or open-ended generality. Folklorists keep trying in the good old academic way they learned as sophomores, i.e., bibliography, research, note cards, footnotes, and all the rest. The results can be amusing "scholarly" articles bristling with authority, but making approximately no progress.

Now the observations: I am a member of a curriculum committee. I recently developed a proposal to admit the undergraduate introductory folk studies course to humanities general education credit. The proposal made good sense to me. An introductory folklore course deals in a rather elementary way with certain aspects of literature, language, music, art, and religion. Its interdisciplinary nature assures that it is not a specialized or vocational course. It thus qualifies in every respect for what people ordinarily mean when they speak of general education. I included an exhibit of a brochure from Harvard University which described such a course in glowing terms. The

Harvard course carried a humanities designation in general education. It would be easy to make a case for the proposal, I thought, and I turned my attention to a visiting professor who had expressed an interest in our videotape collection.

One of the videotapes was a copy of a half-hour program made by our folklore friends at East Tennessee State University. They had taken their portable equipment to a church service in which the congregation sang, played guitars, and sometimes watched in rapt attention as the leaders of the service handled live rattlesnakes or drank poison as acts of faith. I had shown this videotape to two of my classes in support of discussions of folk beliefs, folk religion, and group responses to certain kinds of ritual. An especially touching feature of the program we watched was the prominent role of one intensely serious young man who had died as a result of his participation not long after the recording of the service. Another impressive element was the camera's bedside view of a young man who had been bitten during the service. He was calm, apparently contented with God's will, and recovering without medical assistance.

A church leader explained. In an apparently sincere and certainly articulate presentation he gave biblical authority for both the snake handling and poison drinking. Like any other of many Christian denominations, his church finds its identity in a particular interpretation of a passage of scripture. Members accept that interpretation on faith and act upon it. The speaker was quite liberal in his views. He did not insist that his group had found the only true salvation. Others were free to worship in their various ways. His congregation should be free to worship in its way. His citation of authority and his appearance of sincerity were impressive.

Still, few outsiders would hesitate to label the beliefs and attendant rituals as folklore. This response would be accelerated by the fact that the people involved are a small minority, largely rural, and not representative of high-status business or professional groups. But

one gets into trouble immediately if he designates these people as "folk" and then assumes that all their beliefs and expressions are therefore necessarily folklore. They are modern American citizens who participate in general American culture. The automobile mechanic is not involved with folklore when he tunes an engine, but he appears to be involved with folklore when he reaches into a wooden box and removes a potentially lethal rattlesnake to demonstrate his religious faith before a congregation of fellow believers. Folk belief and folk expression, then, are identified by the mode of thought in the particular context rather than by the identity of the person, time, or place.

Shortly after I viewed the snake-handling videotape, I carried my general education proposal to the curriculum committee. I thought I had the proposal well timed in that the head of the department of philosophy and religion had received rather perfunctory approval for a number of his courses at a previous meeting. I was somewhat surprised, therefore, to meet a solid wall of resistance. Cloakroom politics, apparently, had arranged for a history professor (classical period) to voice the opposition. He came to the meeting carrying a collegiate dictionary. After making a brief statement in which he denounced the idea of folklore in humanities, he read with a flourish two definitions: humanities and folklore. In reading the definition of humanities he stressed "the study of classical languages and literature of Greece and Rome" (Shades of Matthew Arnold!), and in reading the definition of folklore he placed scathing emphasis on such words as "legends," "tales," "common," and "orally," all of which suggest especially low-class stuff.

After some discussion in which such sacrosanct phrases as "traditional curriculum" and "maintaining standards" came up, we voted. My proposal was defeated. Obviously, I had not done enough homework, and even more obviously, I had not taken academic politics seriously at a time of sagging enrollment. As I visited in the corridor following the meeting, the head of the department of

philosophy and religion gave me a few words of consolation. His parting shot stayed with me: "All other things being equal, I would prefer that any student read Plato."

"Plato," I thought, "is a good, safe reference, like Mother and God. There is a widespread folk belief among educators, elevated to unassailable eminence by endless iteration, and devoid of a scrap of objective qualitative or quantitative support. . ."

Then the similarity came into focus. The sincere classics period history professor citing book and verse (out of context) to support his doctrine in his congregation! The parallel was excitingly precise--every act, every expression, every intonation. The reasonable, liberal-minded, pleasant, articulate young man who handled snakes in an East Tennessee church slipped easily and familiarly into the identity of the reasonable, liberal-minded, pleasant, articulate history professor. Both men spoke with confidence in a congregation of like-minded peers. Both proceeded on the basis of commonly held assumptions in their respective groups. None of the assumptions would stand up under objective scrutiny by an outsider. My new insights applied both to the plight of the humanities and to the definition of folklore.

I am convinced that folklore which supports social cohesion is useful. Group dynamics demand it. A reasonable amount of ethnocentrism is essential to the social process. Folklore can, however, become detrimental. Necessary activities supporting social cohesion harden into meaningless ritual. Helpful gods become hollow icons. Useful folk proverbs, skills, and crafts drift off into a limbo of anachronisms. Folklore of the academic community exists--not the little cuties about haunted dormitories and fraternity initiations--but the folklore of the institution and its various disciplines: Studying history will prevent repeating the mistakes of the past; studies in liberal arts will make one a happier and better citizen; reading Plato is good for everyone; studying great literature will improve one's taste; studying logic will make one a better thinker; the dictionary is the final

authority on what a word means; learning to dissect a sentence will improve one's use of his language. All these and many more can be paired off with other traditional beliefs found in other places: It is unlucky to cut a dress pattern on a Friday; if God meant for people to fly he would have given them wings; people with red hair have a short temper; potatoes planted in the light of the moon will all go to vine. Quite often these assumptions, whether they be in the academic community or elsewhere, are voiced with the introductory clause, "Everybody knows." Like barnacles on the bottom of a ship impeding progress, much folklore stifles clear, critical thinking, no matter where it is found.

I am no closer to a concise definition of folklore than ever, but I feel that I can identify the principal ingredient with greater assurance than before. That ingredient is magic, or a magical mode of thought. Blind invocation of authority, be it a verse from the scriptures, a dictionary definition, or a quoted proverb, is a reflection of such a mode. The use of familiar linguistic formulae such as incantations, occupational jargon, or allusions to mythological identities is similarly a reflection of the magical mode. Ratification by ritual in a congregation where these devices are employed renders a comfortable feeling of doing things right. Use of familiar formulae is folklore in action wherever it occurs. Invocation of the cliché is more complex in a college curriculum committee than in a country church, but the magical mode of thought is the constant.

I suggest that this mode of thought is likely to intrude more and more strongly when an individual or a group feels threatened or outnumbered. In Tennessee the snake-handling cult has been threatened by outside legal pressure. The church services continue in defiance of what members consider to be oppressive interference. In this situation they appear to escalate their opposition and withdraw into even greater exclusiveness. Although some professors appear to recognize and accommodate changing needs in education, others, feeling threatened by change, withdraw to a reactionary posture. It is in this invocation

of the magic of traditional assumptions that one sees academic folklore at work, folklore that is startlingly similar to that of the snake-handling cult.

Finally, one might ask, who, then, are the folk? In my opinion, they are the majority everywhere, academic or bucolic, whenever they respond more to the magic mode of thought than to exercise of critical, self-correcting logic. A slogan is easier to produce than a syllogism. The familiar formula is more comfortable to live with than the new experience. And it is easier to patronize an antique philosopher with pious platitudes than to cope with the bothersome ideas of a contemporary upstart.

In a recent address, President Roger Howell, Jr., of Bowdoin College expressed concern over the fact that exciting curricular ideas have difficulty in being heard. One of the purposes of a special committee to investigate curricular problems is "to make the rhetoric with which we discuss the values of liberal education conform to reality." He indicated that such lofty aims as training the student in the art of critical thinking, inspiring the capacity for continuing self-education, and developing an appreciation for the totality of human experience, are not achieved by rhetoric but by design and by hard work." Spontaneous incompetence is of little value, no matter how sincere it is.

FACULTY ACTIVITIES AND AWARDS

EMERY ALFORD has completed a third summer season as percussionist for the stage production "I Hear America Singing" at Opryland USA, Nashville, Tennessee.

CHARMAINE ALLMON reviewed Richard Beale Davis' book Literature and Society in Colonial Virginia in the summer issue of the Southern Humanities Review, and lectured on "Characteristics of Southern Literature" at a seminar on Library Services at the University of Alabama.

TOM BALDWIN has been elected president of the Kentucky Chapter of the American Association of Teachers of German for the years 1975-77.

BOB BLANN has been nominated for the Public Relation Society of America's coveted Gold Anvil Award. The award is the highest given an educator by the PSRA and recognizes outstanding achievement in Public Relations teaching, research, and/or service.

HOWARD CARPENTER spoke at the annual meeting of the Kentucky Library Association in Lexington on "Music in Early Kentucky." Also, reviews of music of Kostek, Shifrin, Luening, Stein, and de Wert appeared in the American Music Teacher.

H. J. CUSTEAD, JR., conducted an in-service session for Logan County teachers of art and music on August 29, 1975.

CARLEY DODD presented a paper at the International Communication Association convention in April on "Social Structure and Communication Behavior Among the Children of God," and was appointed associate commissioner on the Commission for Intercultural Communication within the national organization of the Speech Communication Association. He also authored a first chapter in a speech text, Fundamentals of Effective Speech Communication.

A new faculty member in the Center for Intercultural and Folk Studies is BURT FEINTUCH who received in August his Ph.D. in folklore and folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. Burt is an editorial board member of Keystone Folklore and an executive board member of the Pennsylvania Folklore Society.

JAMES GODFREY was elected chairman of the National School Orchestra Association Service Office by the Board of Directors of that group.

LOWELL HARRISON published The Civil War in Kentucky (University Press of Kentucky). He also wrote articles which appeared in two recent issues of the Western Alumnus. His article, "A Cast Iron Man: John C. Calhoun," appeared in the American History Illustrated. In addition to supplying reviews for a number of journals, Dr. Harrison is currently serving on the Editorial Board of the University Press of Kentucky, the State Steering Committee of the American Issues Forum, the Governor's Advisory Commission on Public Documents, and the Bicentennial Publications Committee on Local History.

CARLTON JACKSON has just returned from Islamabad, Pakistan where he served during the past year as Fulbright Professor in U. S. Studies. While there he delivered lectures or conducted seminars for the U. S. Information Agency in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Nepal. He also wrote articles, "British Pubs Aren't What They Used to Be" which was published in the Punjabber and "Breaking the Cultural Barrier: The Theatre World of John Allee" which was published in Dramatics.

J. E. JONES authored the Biography of Z. K. Jones, M.D.

DAVID LEE published "The Attempt to Impeach Governor Horton," in the Tennessee Historical Quarterly this last summer.

BILL LEONARD served as state representative from the Kentucky Theatre Association at a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Southeastern Theatre Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

LEE MITCHELL recently completed a three-year project in which he surveyed Ph.D. programs in the field of theatre. A report on his project was given at the August meeting of the American Theatrical Association in Washington, D. C.

JULIET MC CRORY was elected president of the Bowling Green chapter of the American Association of University Women. She is also chairman of the state-wide committee to select the young speech teacher of the year and the speech communication teacher of the year.

JIM WAYNE MILLER directed the poetry workshop at the Eastern Kentucky University Creative Writing Conference in June; was keynote speaker at the Institute on the Implications of Appalachian Culture on Human Service Planning at the University of Cincinnati in July; served as writer in residence during the month of April at Sue Bennett College; was keynote speaker at the Appalachian Festival sponsored by the Appalachian Urban Council in Cincinnati in May; and conducted a poetry workshop at the University of Louisville in March of this year. During the year he has published 15-20 poems in several different publications and has had reviews appear in the Courier-Journal and the Kentucky Folklore Record. He also contributed to Harper's magazine Wraparound in June and to Harper's Weekly on April 25. Two of his poems in The Wooden Tower (an anthology of Appalachian literature) are to be used in the West Virginia middle schools.

LYN MONTELL published Ghosts Along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills (University of Tennessee Press) in August of this year. This publication was assisted by the American Council of Learned Societies under a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

REGIS O'CONNOR, along with other members of the Speech and Theatre Department, has revised the textbook Fundamentals of Effective Speech Communication. It is being published by Burgess Publishing Company and is used in all sections of Speech 145.

JOHN WARREN OAKES attended a month-long Institute in Arts Administration at Harvard University. He also serves on the Board of Directors of the Kentucky Alliance for Arts Education. In May and September he exhibited his work in Owensboro, Knoxville, and New York City.

JIM PEARSE chaired a session at the Kentucky Association for Communication Arts. He is also a member of an ad hoc committee of the Speech Communication Association to determine the needs and directions for a proposed History of Oral Interpretation.

DWIGHT POUNDS supervised the writing of a mobility manual for the Air Force at an Air National Guard unit in Louisville.

S. V. RAMA RAO helped select paintings done by South Indian artists for a travelling exhibit in Kentucky under the sponsorship of the Kentucky Arts Commission. He also had a one-man show of paintings in New York City and was elected to the Executive Board of the World Telegu Conference, Hyderabad, India for 1975 through 1977.

CLAUDE ROSE was elected chairman of the KMEA Festival Commission. He was also listed in the 1975 edition of Outstanding Educators of America containing biographies and records of achievement of selected college and university educators.

CLARICE SCARBOROUGH was elected secretary-treasurer of the Kentucky state chapter of the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese (AATSP). She was also appointed faculty advisor for a group of Western students who studied in Madrid at the Centro de Idiomas in a summer program organized by Villanova University.

JULIUS SCOTT received the Distinguished Service Award for Teaching at the May 1975 commencement. At the April meeting of the Southern Section of the Evangelical Theological Society he read a paper entitled, "Parties in the Church of Jerusalem" and has also served as chairman of that section this year.

ARVIN VOS participated in an eight-week summer seminar on "The Mediaeval World View" at Indiana University sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities. He also read a paper, "Behaviorist Methodology: Success or Failure" at the Ohio University Conference on Humanness held in May at Athens, Ohio.

That universities will increasingly mirror the ideologies of the societies of which they are a part was the dominant theme of the recent International Association of Universities (staged in Moscow and attended by 900 delegates representing 466 universities from 86 countries).

Delegates from the West emphasized the need to resist state interference in what should be taught and how. Socialist delegates stressed the role of universities in meeting the skilled manpower needs of the national economy. The consensus, however, was that universities, whether they liked it or not, were increasingly having their objectives defined for them from without.

The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Miami now specifies the following distribution of required credits for graduation:

English	6
Foreign Languages	6
Humanities	18
Mathematics-Sciences	11-15
History-Social Sciences	15
TOTAL	56-60

JOHN T. STAHL

John Stahl, Professor of Philosophy at Western Kentucky University, died at his home in Bowling Green, Kentucky, on May 4, 1975, after a four-month battle with cancer. He is survived by his wife, Marcia, two daughters, his mother, a sister, and one brother. He was born in 1936 in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He was awarded the Ph.D. from Boston University in 1967. In 1966, he joined the Department of Philosophy at Western, where he remained until his death.

His early death, at the age of 38, has left only a small amount of his thought in published form. Besides a number of book reviews, his two published articles are "Gordon Clark's Philosophy of Science," in The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark (The Craig Press, 1969) and "Austin Farrer on C. S. Lewis as 'The Christian Apologist'," Christian Scholar's Review (1975). Among his four volumes of unpublished papers are "Plantinga and Possible Worlds," read before the Kentucky Philosophical Association in 1970, and "About What Scheffler and Chomsky Say About What Quine Says About What There Is: Assuming and Asserting," read before the same body in 1972. He was vice-president of the Kentucky Philosophical Association in 1973-1974, and became president the following year.

John's early philosophical interest was in existentialism and phenomenology. By the time he received his Ph.D. that interest had expanded to take in the philosophy of religion, and he took for the subject of his dissertation the philosophical theology of F. R. Tennant. When he began teaching in 1966, his ever-widening interests led him into a detailed study of the philosophy of logic, the philosophy of science, and the philosophy of language, all of which he taught in stimulating courses. Never satisfied with his broad knowledge, he

took both graduate and undergraduate courses in linguistics and mathematics to widen his perspective further. At the end of his life he was engaged in a study of C.S. Lewis' views of literary categories in an attempt to relate literary criticism to the problem of religious language. (He prized his membership in the C.S. Lewis Society of New York.)

Until the last two weeks of his life, John was alert, busy reading, thinking, and discussing. He helped direct an M.A. thesis while confined to his bed. The outstanding trait of John's writing and thinking was the clarity and simplicity with which he expressed himself. He was a modest man. He treated the views of his students and of his colleagues with the respect of a person who is interested in discovering the truth, regardless of whose position it supports. He was a gentle man. He loved animals, especially horses, and he had a natural gift for handling them. He was a good teacher. He insisted that a course be no simpler than a proper understanding of its subject allowed, but he was always available and eager to help understanding grow. He was a brave man. He faced his approaching death and the indignities of his disabling illness with a courage which inspired and challenged his family and friends. He will be remembered as a kind, honest, gracious person whose moral and spiritual influence will be deeply missed.

Larry Mayhew

"PUSH 'EM BACK, PUSH 'EM BACK, WAY BACK" DEPT.

(The following letter was written by the head of the English Department at Purdue University. It was sent to Jack Mollenkopf when he was head coach.)

Dear Coach Mollenkopf:

Remembering our discussion of your football men who were having troubles in English, I have decided to ask you, in turn, for help.

We feel that Paul Spindles, one of our most promising scholars, has a great chance for a Rhodes Scholarship, which would be a great thing for him and for Purdue. Paul has the academic record for this award, but we find that the aspirant is also required to have other excellences, and ideally should have a good record in athletics. Paul is weak physically. He tries hard, but he has troubles in athletics. But he does try hard.

We propose that you give some special consideration to Paul as a varsity player, putting him if possible in the backfield of the football team. In this way, we can show a better college record to the committee deciding on the Rhodes scholarships. We realize that Paul will be a problem on the field, but--as you have often said--co-operation between our department and yours is highly desirable, and we do expect Paul to try hard, of course. During his intervals of study we shall coach him as much as we can. His work in the English Club and on the debate team will force him to miss many practices, but we intend to see that he carries an old football around to bounce (or whatever one does with a football) during intervals in his work. We expect Paul to show entire good will in his work for you, and though he will not be able to begin football practice till late in the season, he will finish the season with good attendance.

Sincerely Yours,

Dr. Barriss Mills
Head, English Department (cont.)

P.S. We are delaying a decision on your request made to this department regarding a passing grade for your fullback, Pete Jarmanski, until we receive your favorable reply.

Derek C. Bok, president of Harvard University, in his remarks to the opening session of the Conference on Undergraduate Education, said that "published research is still the best evidence of the enduring quality of a professor's mind, and a proven interest in research still provides the most reliable basis for predicting whether he (or she) will continue to have something fresh and important to say two or three decades hence."

The Committee on Reform and Renewal of Liberal Education at Stanford reports that recent national data show that between 1966 and 1974 the number of high school graduates scoring 600 or above on the verbal Scholastic Aptitude tests dropped 24.7%.

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